



## Ilustrado

*Miguel Syjuco*

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## **Ilustrado** Miguel Syjuco

It begins with a body. On a clear day in winter, the battered corpse of Crispin Salvador is pulled from the Hudson River—taken from the world is the controversial lion of Philippine literature. Gone, too, is the only manuscript of his final book, a work meant to rescue him from obscurity by exposing the crimes of the Filipino ruling families. Miguel, his student and only remaining friend, sets out for Manila to investigate.

To understand the death, Miguel scours the life, piecing together Salvador's story through his poetry, interviews, novels, polemics, and memoirs. The result is a rich and dramatic family saga of four generations, tracing 150 years of Philippine history forged under the Spanish, the Americans, and the Filipinos themselves. Finally, we are surprised to learn that this story belongs to young Miguel as much as to his lost mentor, and we are treated to an unhindered view of a society caught between reckless decay and hopeful progress.

Exuberant and wise, wildly funny and deeply moving, *Ilustrado* explores the hidden truths that haunt every family. It is a daring and inventive debut by a new writer of astonishing talent.

## **Ilustrado Details**

Date : Published April 27th 2010 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published 2008)

ISBN : 9780374174781

Author : Miguel Syjuco

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Cultural, Asia

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# From Reader Review *Ilustrado* for online ebook

## K.D. Absolutely says

Reading Michael Syjuco's *Ilustrado* is like eating **chopsuey**.

### **Ingredients:**

1 kg. Main Story *Miguel Syjuco going back to Manila to find the truth about Crispin Salvador's death*

1/2 kg. Biography in Progress *Crispin Salvador Eight Lives Lived* by Michael Syjuco

2 cups. Unfinished Manuscript *The Bridge Ablaze*

1/3 cup. *Kaputol* trilogy

5 tbs. Interview *The Philippine-Gazette.com.ph*

2 tps. 1988 Interview in the *Paris Review*

To taste: *Crispin Salvador's email*

For me, this is like reading patches of several parallel stories, told in the interviews, novels, polemics, memoirs and poetry. Those individual works were cut into pieces and scattered in the different parts of the book to form an egg mosaic-like story. For somebody like me who have been in this country for 46 years, the parts of this mosaic do not necessarily fit well. Some of those snippets talked about the Marcos era when the main story was set after 9/11 2001 and people were no longer talking about the Marcoses. It is as if the 20ish Syjuco tried to put everything he heard from his coaches or history teacher or read from history book into this 304-page work. Syjuco is a rich kid, an *ilustrado* himself. After studying in Ateneo (a school for rich people), he studied his masters in the US. Read his Acknowledgement at the end of the book, you will see that there are many people who helped him put up this book and most of them belong to the rich and famous in the Philippine, particularly the Fil-Am, literary world. With those people backing Syjuco, coming up with a novel with a huge scope, spanning a period of 150 years, like this should not be a hard task.

What is Syjuco's objective in writing this novel? For us Filipinos to know who we are? If the answer is yes, why did he have to make this so hard to read? I don't think that the common Filipinos, who more than the schooled ones could have benefited from reading this book, would shell out P325 (~US\$7) from their hard-earned money. Is it to win the Palanca and Man Literary Award? Well, he got those already. So, I am waiting for Syjuco if he can still come up with a follow up novel with this grand scope and gimmicky enough to get another nod from Palanca and Asian Man Literary gods.

However, I agree that Filipinos should read this. Many of us complain that there are no books about the Philippines and written by a Filipino worthy of reading. We say that all those best-selling books of Bob Ong and the proliferation of Tagalog romance books are so shallow that they cheapen the standard of Philippine literature. If you are one of these people, I challenge you to read *Ilustrado* and I know you will no longer complain that there is no book that you will not be ashamed seeing holding and reading in public like when you are sipping your expensive *frappe* at your favorite *Starbucks* outlet. Reading *Ilustrado* will even get you an image of an cultured or *cunio* Filipino who is not only supporting a homegrown author but also that of being a bit more intellectual than those *domestic helps* reading Bob Ongs and Precious Moments novels. Too bad that the book was printed in New York so the minimum-wage employees in our publishing companies did not earn anything from this.

Most of my friends here in Goodreads have been singing *hosannah* in honor of Syjuco. My question is: what now? Did the book make them feel proud that they are Filipinos? My emphatic answer is no. Syjuco showed

us who we are. 300 years under the Spanish government ruled by Mexican governors. 30 years under the American government. 3 years under the Japanese emperor. We have a damaged culture and corruption is rampant in our government. More than half of our people are under poverty line. 7 out of 10 Filipinos are experiencing hunger everyday. We all know those, right? We don't need Syjuco and his 7-dollar book to tell us those.

Darn. He even has this Erning, Rocky Isip and Boy Bastos jokes as if Syjuco is ridiculing us while we is laughing all the way to the bank from the proceeds of this book.

But this depends really on one's taste. For one, I always make sure of having 2 servings of fruits and vegetables every day. When I eat out, I normally order a vegetable dish. I first check what the restaurant offers. If there is nothing interesting, I go for a *chopsuey*. You can never go wrong with one. It has all my favorite veggies in it and if it is cooked the right way, the carrots, pepper, beans, etc should be crispy and the sauce should be a bit sweet if those vegetables are really fresh. Yum yum.

But chopsuey is filling. Ilustrado is a huge book without, sadly, any meaning nor patriotic purpose. Syjuco wasted the opportunity of improving the negative image of his/our country, the Philippines, to the world.

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## David says

A competent piece of work but not really more than this.

The book had a few problems

- ~ Stylistically flat. In literary fiction there is an expectation of eloquence...this book approaches this but does not quite make it.
- ~ Characters are not compelling and/or believable.
- ~ The variety of source materials should sound like they're from different personalities and they don't really do this. All seems to be the same flat character.
- ~ Too many pop culture references. The problem with this is that it gives your writing a shelf life of 12 minutes. Lacks depth
- ~ Psychological observations were trite

I liked the fact that the Philippines are making a showing in the world of literary fiction...not just regionally.

Some may enjoy this work but I was left feeling neither hot nor cold by it...indifferent. Perhaps, the worst condemnation of literary fiction there is.

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## James Murphy says

Ilustrado is a term for the new, young Filipinos alive with promise. They're movers and shakers with immense potential. Ilustrado the novel is about one such individual, the writer Crispin Salvador, whose story is told in a long ribbon of poems, memoirs, interviews, and fragments of novels and essays. This treasure is collected and presented for us by the writer Miguel Syjuco who returns to the Philippines following Salvador's untimely death in order to uncover truths about the man who'd been both mentor and friend. As

narrative it becomes a novel of an odyssey home and the rediscovery of heritage for the young Miguel while at the same time the interwoven fragments of Salvador's writings form a family saga reaching back to the mid-19th century.

To describe it this way makes it sound interesting, but it's not. I couldn't develop a stake in this novel. I found it terribly tedious. Miguel's story, especially, seemed artificial to me and Syjuco didn't make me think I should pay attention, look for import. His return to the Philippines reminded me of the popular 80's novels of alienation, *Less Than Zero* and *Bright Lights, Big City*. The young search for experience. Salvador's story was a shotgun pattern and difficult to follow. Failing to find a clear path to significance and what I look for in fiction, I didn't follow too closely. It's an ambitious novel, I think. And it's impressive in that Syjuco had to create the author voice of Crispin Salvador and sustain it throughout the book as well as that of the narrator Miguel.

It's still early in the year but *Ilustrado* may prove to be 2013's big disappointment. The fault is most likely mine. We make a team, the reader and book And it may simply be that I failed to hold up my end of the deal.

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## Apokripos says

### **Blurring Realities**

**(A Book Review of *Ilustrado* by Miguel Syjuco)**

*Ilustrado* is the ambitious and exceptionally complicated debut novel by Miguel Syjuco that won the Palanca Grand Prize for the Novel Category in 2008 and the prestigious Man Asian Literary Prize later that year when it was still in manuscript form.

Since news of his prodigious success came out, I can't help but feel elated, for his triumph is as much ours; his breakthrough is a vindication of sorts on our much neglected and often beleaguered local literary scene as it opens the door to global fiction and foreign audience. And indeed we have arrived. By this sheer fact alone I became in an instant Syjuco's fan and having to wait for two years just to read his novel doesn't diminish it one bit, for *Ilustrado* lives up to the hype and deliver the goods.

The novel centers on the great Filipino author, Crispin Salvador, fished out of the Hudson in New York in 2001. Prolific, celebrated, and despised Crispin, dubbed as "The Panther of Philippine Letters," was the shining star in the West between the '70s and '80s before he fell into obscurity. He was last working on a book that was to catapult him back to fame, the controversial yet up to now unseen "The Bridges Ablaze," exposing the corrupt roots of many powerful Filipino families. The strange circumstances of Crispin's death leads his young student and protégé, the eponymous protagonist Miguel Syjuco, to investigate whether or not it was indeed suicide as had been reported by the press and the police.

Miguel suspects that Crispin's death is linked to his final novel, which had mysteriously disappeared. He returns to the Philippines to uncover more things about his mentor, but more importantly, Miguel discovers a lot about himself and what it means to be a young writer who's left the country.

Part mystery thriller, part historical fiction, part political novel, *Ilustrado* spans the last 150 years chronicling

the Philippines and its people with lush prose, a deluge of quotable lines, hilarious Pinoy-isms and meta-fictional meditations on the craft of writing and Filipino Diaspora.

What is truly notable about the novel is the depiction of the dead author Crispin through a meticulous reconstruction of his lifework — a technique called literary bricolage — with morsels in the book excerpts, memoir, interviews, essays, and poetry inserted in between the main narrative thread. This not only rendered the character with three dimensional feel but also gave Syjuco a leeway to explore, with its non-linear structure, the Philippine's history as it encompasses the late 1800s during the time of the ilustrados, the Philippine Assembly under the US, the Huk rebellion, the Marcos regime up to Y2K. It staggers the mind that Crispin's pseudo-bibliographies was all made up by Syjuco (the author) himself including a Wikipedia entry and its amusing to know that when he pitched his manuscript to an agent in New York it was declined because it heavily quoted from another author's works. And Syjuco taking this as a cue realized he's up to something here.

The question of what is fact and what is fiction lies at the heart of *Ilustrado*. Earlier in the book, the protagonist mentions of an ersatz Oyster Perpetual that he wears, virtually indistinguishable from a genuine Rolex watch. This serves as the book's motif and as the novel progresses it increasingly blurs the line of what is real and what is not. Perhaps most noticeable of this is how the author and the protagonist not only happen to share the same name but also some parallelisms from the school they've attended up to some degree of familial background.

This theme perfectly reflects the intricate and ingenious structure of the book as it brings together passages from books, articles, blog entries with comments, TV, chismis, Boy Bastos jokes, real history and people, overheard conversations, fabricated footnotes and the narrator's increasingly phantasmagoric dreams. A disorderly design for our congested and bloated information age for in this present era isn't the truth fragmented?

As others who have read the novel are bound to complain, the novel doesn't make sense, that so much is happening, there's really nothing happening at all. It's so *magulo*. Yet when you view and take it in its entirety when you read the novel, all these different things happening in the periphery makes it whole. And this is what's fascinating and absorbing about it: in every measure it is a true Filipino novel for in our everyday chaos thrives our order.

Reading *Ilustrado* is a celebration of all things Filipino. For who but us will relish and recognize reading the contained historical references, personalities, analogues, innuendos and "in-jokes"? For all we know the Lupases suspiciously sound like the Lopezes or the Changcos, the Cuangcos, the thinly veiled Reverend Martin seems to be targeted at a charismatic lay leader and the actor turned President Fernando Estregan might refer to you-know-who. Go figure. Yet in all its guises the novel is unapologetic about its Filipino roots and I gave it high praise as it shunned the often hackneyed exoticism some Filipino writers resort to.

In its last pages the book gathers strength and seems to be going to different trajectories. It ends indeterminately, or possibly, in considerable contradicting ways. Then it abruptly stops, sending us to the final, ultimately surprising revelation: an ambivalent yet powerful ending that clarifies, adds a resonance to the supposed disorder skillfully rendered earlier. The book's conclusion, enough to satisfy the most patient of readers, is a singular achievement in and of itself.

The term "ilustrado" which also means "enlightened," refers to the Filipinos educated in Europe during the Spanish colonization. They would later foment the revolution of 1896 using the things they've learned against their oppressors.

They are the forebears of today's estimated 100, 000 strong *balikbayan*, and the country is beckoning them not to wage war but to start the revolution to renewal armed with the experiences they've learned from other countries.

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Published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux  
(Trade Paperback Philippine First Edition, 2010)  
306 pages  
Started: July 6, 2010  
Finished: July 16, 2010  
My Rating: ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

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## Tintin says

The scope and breadth of this novel is so mind-boggling I don't even know where to start.

Part of my difficulty reviewing *Ilustrado* is that I can't use the same yardstick I use for reviewing most fiction. My usual standards-- character dynamics, plot progression, willful suspension of disbelief -- don't matter as much in this book. It's *different*. I had to set a different standard.

You'd think that a story covering the lives and family histories of two separate individuals spanning 150 years across three continents, and continuing into the 21st century would take thousands of pages to work. But Syjuco manages the feat in 300 pages, complete with a stark and honest depiction of modern Manila and political and literary commentaries.

Syjuco's portrayal of the madness which is the Philippines strikes close to home. Too close to home at times, I think. The protagonist shares with the author the name Miguel Syjuco, and the real Syjuco also shares with the fictional character the trait of coming from a traditionally rich and political family (his father is a politician allied with Gloria Macapagal Arroyo), among others. I can't help but think this novel is a kind of pseudo-autobiography. Syjuco is indeed the embodiment of the present-day *Ilustrado*, children of the landed rich who were sent to study abroad to be 'Enlightened.' Now as it was then, they hold the greatest potential to change our country. You can't argue with political clout and economics.

No book review or summary I've read comes close to describing what *Ilustrado* actually is, so I encourage others to read it for themselves. There are, however, stylistic choices that significantly up the barriers of entry. *Ilustrado* is not what I'd call *accessible*. Here are my reasons:

### *Unabashed literary style*

Good prose; overwritten at times. Syjuco is also fond of using 10-dollar words. After a while I gave up and took out a dictionary. (And I **never** consult a dictionary while reading).

### *Liberal use of Post-Modern techniques*

Prior to *Ilustrado* I only approached post-modern literature with a meter-long poking stick. Post-modern stories are notorious for being out-there and just plain weird compared to regular stories. Reading it was like a crash course on post-modernist literature as it uses nearly every technique in the post-modernist arsenal.

But if you're open to exploring the genre and getting out of your reading comfort zone, it's a rewarding experience.

(As an aside, I looked up post-modernism while reading and was surprised at the number of popular works that could be considered post-modern. *The Matrix*. Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*. *Inception*. Even *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* is post-modern!)

### ***Non-linear storyline***

The main story is more or less linear, but timelines and settings jump. The prologue ends with the protagonist writing:

*"The facts, shattered, are gathered, for your deliberation, like a broken mirror whose final piece has been forced into place."* And that's exactly how it is.

### ***Complexity of Narrative***

This is not an easy read, the kind you can breeze through in a sitting. It's the kind of book that benefits the most from a second reading. The narrative is like a bundle of knots to be unraveled -- close and deliberate observation is required.

Syjuco's depiction of the Philippines is at times dark, at times jokingly funny, but always rings true. It's like holding a polished mirror. Which is why I think Filipinos above all should read this book. Only a Filipino could catch most of the oblique references and see the jokes for the self-deprecating slurs they really are. We laugh at these jokes because they contain truth, but when we laugh, we are laughing at nothing but ourselves!

It's not a perfect read. I didn't like all of the techniques he used or thought all parts of the book interesting. But considering his background, I admire Syjuco's courage to speak out his political opinions, no holds barred. The picture he paints of present-day Philippines isn't pretty, but it's close to reality. *Ilustrado* a modern-day descendant of Rizal's novels. And despite myself, I do love the post-modern twist. I love how the book melded both fact and fiction to the point where it becomes impossible to tell the two apart.

This bold novel gets **5 stars** from me.

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## **Rav De Castro says**

This is some serious crap and waste of time. It's like a know-it-all classmate who just transferred to your esteemed university from a small-town community college who wants to show the world that he knows about stuff. I can believe it won an award. I mean, the Syjuco's have money.

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## **Monique says**

Five things about this book:

(1) A good dictionary should be a good companion/reference material. I'm a wide reader, and I think my vocabulary is fair because of the nature of my work, but I thought this book had one flowery word too many. Lots of big words, in my opinion meant more to impress than to express.



(2) I didn't want to read more about the sorry state of my country ~ its politics, economy, poverty, and people. When I picked this book, I thought I had a mystery to read about. Instead, what I got was a rehash of the Philippines' recent political upheavals and dramas.

(3) Confusing, confusing, confusing.

(4) But I definitely loved the stories about Erning Isip, the guy from AMA Computer College, and his life's travails. I couldn't help laughing out loud at Boy Bastos' chronicles, as well.

(5) I thought there were some parts that could have been omitted for being irrelevant.

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## **L says**

This book can be probably best described as an encyclopedic narrative encompassing most of what that genre entails - which would mean not only the 'fun' stuff like the different voices and media, but also the sometimes frustrating stuff - like digressions, obsessive inclusive of details, etc. I feel too it may also be a ghost story, in more ways than one. Because part of it takes on the voice of a young and inexperienced writer, there are parts of this book that are ridiculously (though in my opinion deliberately) overwritten. Still overall this book made me laugh out loud and stays true to the various media it presents, especially blogs and political writing and reporting.

It is one of the more ambitious novels I've read, which means that it manages to do a lot but also leaves some aspects not completely and satisfyingly resolved, which is not always a bad thing. It is also one of the most self-conscious books I've read, which to me flaws an otherwise decent story (and for me story is always paramount). Still, especially if you are interested in the Philippines or Fil-Am literature, this is worthwhile, good for some laughs, often thought-provoking, and a fun read.

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## **Louize says**

### **SPOILERS ALERT**

The Ilustrados of 19th century Philippines, the “*enlightened ones*”, were young men born from landowners; educated in Europe; top-hatted; monocled; and Spanish-speaking bucks; with nannies and tutors to run after them. Seemed a harsh truth, but the truth nonetheless. What's good about these men, despite their higher social status, was that they sought reform through social equality and economic power for our country. It was through their works that injustices imposed on Filipinos by the Spaniards were exposed.

The same may be used to describe the two main characters of Miguel Syjuco's *Ilustrado* (*with a few touch of modernity, of course*). Both were born from opulent political families and foreign-educated. In reading, the parallelism and symmetries between Crispin Salvador (*the mentor*) and Miguel Syjuco (*the protégée*) was hard to miss. It was so obvious, in fact, that it was difficult to distinguish whose POV I was currently reading at times.

The book opened to the shocking death of the mentor, drowned in the Hudson River. Suicide or murdered was simply irrelevant to the flow of the story. The mystery/ adventure lies in the protégée's adamant search for the missing manuscript of Salvador's *obra maestra*, **The Bridges Ablaze**. To write a biography of his teacher and mentor, then, was the best way to start in finding where the manuscript is.

*“My biography of Crispin will be an indictment of my country, of time, of our forgetful, self-centered humanity.”*

Reviewers before me have complained about Syjuco's affluent use of thesaurus-like words (I concur), which thankfully receded from Chapter 5 onward. This was not an easy book that may be simply read in one sitting; there was no straight-forward narrative. It required a good amount of persistence. And, if patience is truly a virtue... well, I guess it was a due reward that I got in the end.

*“Likely a construction worker, one of the millions-strong diaspora indentured by the persuasiveness of dreams.”* (In other words –OFW.)

Quoting one of Syjuco's characters, *Ilustrado* is a literary bricolage: a pastiche of the narrator's story, excerpts from his biography of Salvador, excerpts of Salvador's writings, blogs by a Filipino literary critic, extracts from an interview with Salvador, emails, news, *and the most confusing*, the in between actual movement in the characters' story. Being his first novel, I'm sure he simply would like to pour and cram every ounce of idea he had. A second helping will probably reap more satisfaction. Perhaps, in the future Mr. Syjuco would not try too hard to be literary. Brilliance does not come with more, but with sufficiency.

*“I meant you can't bring an unwritten place to life without losing something substantial... How do we fly from someone else's pigeonhole? We haven't. We must. And to do that, we have to figure out how to properly translate ourselves.”*

Let me describe this book in my own POV, please bear with me. Half of this book was funny, truly laughable. For in fact, Filipinos do laugh at their own idiocy, whether we are quoted as Erning Isip or Boy Bastos for that matter. Half of it was truly and unrepentantly laughing at me all the while I was reading it. Hard to believe, but I humbly admit to it. This book has a certain element that over-fed and confused me; meanwhile I was thinking that I got it, but I actually don't. Well, not until I reached the conclusion.

*“We are liberated by the multiplicity of conclusions to every unfinished story.”*

Readers, like myself, expect the grand allusions this book may have to our very feverous political actors and their dramas, which they themselves have grandly written and directed. I had a few taste of that, but the entirety of the premise was veered elsewhere. Like most of the *Ilustrados* from the 19th century, Miguel and Crispin were both intellectuals seeking reform, a new beginning; another chance at life. Thus, makes them the modern *Ilustrados*. Not political actors, no, not them. But their lives were also full of drama, and nothing less.

*“If I could only take one myself, start over without having to fix the things that need to be fixed.”*

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## **Jenny says**

Oh gosh, I cannot express the relief I felt after finishing the book. First time I felt that way towards reading! Let me explain.

I was on page 19 of the book and I already felt bored. 19 pages of trying to sound smart. Comes out pretentious and overdone.

By the time I reached the middle (I pushed myself to continue reading as I desperately wanted to find a silver lining), I patiently looked for any revelation, for that sense of enlightenment which will justify 200 pages of excerpts from the works of Crispin Salvador, without any proper context or reason for citing them in the first place. I really tried to understand the purpose of it all.

--last 50 pages, I dragged myself to get through it--

--last 10 or so pages, I was mad at myself for reading so slow (I constantly found myself preferring to watch movies than actually reading the book, it just doesn't catch and grip you, still no silver lining at this point)--

Epilogue. There, finally! The twist, that silver lining! Finally, after 300 pages, I now know the point of the novel. But do you really want to drag yourself through all those 300 pages of broken episodes before you understand the novel? I found the style too overbearing, weighing, and as already mentioned, dragging. The episodic style of writing might work for a short story, but not for a novel worth 300+ pages, especially if there is nothing there but random dreams, excerpts, little stories that try to sound deep and wise. Throughout the novel, you can sense that there was a little too much effort put into trying to look "Art"-sy (with a BIG LETTER "A"), smart (what with the obscure vocabulary and a thousand metaphors). Comes out pedantic.

Sadly, still doesn't explain the hodgepodge of dreams, illusions, book excerpts, sentences that purport to be stylish or those that are intended to be used as possible quotes of eager readers. Too much style, too little connection, contextualization, characterization. Citing random excerpts of an author's works does not necessarily let you reveal his character. I understand that it is supposed to make sense at the end, when the whole art of the story is laid out. But certainly, the reader should not have been exposed to such display of pretentiousness up to page 300ish. To be fair, some paragraphs were worth the read, such as the description of the NAIA, the good ending (the ending saved it needless to say), the childhood stories of Crispin and Miguel were also interesting to read, but not enough to make you like the book. Because even if the ending was such a revelation, by that time, after going through such a torturous reading experience, you're just like, "Whew!"

Apart from the ending, another redeeming value can be found towards the end, when different permutations of the ending regarding the stories of Lakandula, Reverend Martin, President Estregan, Vita Nova, and Bansamoro are enumerated. It shows the circus-like character that is Philippine politics and religion, and the lunacy that comes with it. Sadly, right after this, we are plunged into another excruciating, pretentious, artsy-fartsy episode where Miguel goes to Isla Dulcinea.

I mentioned that I was desperate for a silver lining. Probably because it garnered so much acclaim. But wow, I am a little disappointed at all this. I appreciate what the author intended(?) the novel to be. Ultimately, I find it to be a novel about writing, not really of a writer's life. Such can give justice to the different styles, the excerpts. But I am making a guess here. I want to defend the book to myself, in order to understand why it won so much acclaim. But isn't the book supposed to do that for itself?

Last bit: some descriptions of Manila were too exoticized, even inaccurate. Go to page 158, the scene in the cab when the taxi driver makes some nasty words about the politician (Grapes). Very hard to imagine happening in real life. Maybe the author needs to try riding a cab to get a sense of this. His depiction of the Philippines, especially the politics, can be precise. But sometimes, like the taxi driver scene and the part where he gives a "coin" for a boat ride (in what year did a boat ride ever cost a coin?!), the depictions do not feel authentic. At best, the work is ambitious. At worst, it leaves the reader empty-- that is, until the last page. Read it if you are patient enough to last 304 pages, but only to like the last four.

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## **Aldrin says**

Miguel Syjuco's "official" Web site is a joke. Entering [www.miguelsyjuco.com](http://www.miguelsyjuco.com) (a perfectly innocuous URL) on your browser's address bar for the first time, you may be surprised seconds later to find neither the dynamic cleverness of an author Web site like Jennifer Egan's nor the static simplicity of something like David Mitchell's. Instead you'll be treated to an embarrassment of riches, chock-full as it is with blocks of text and images forming a tapestry of memes, and an assault on the senses, particularly on your sense of sight but not, to be sure, on your sense of humor.

MiguelSyjuco.com, as the site's welcome greeting says, is an online fan shrine built by a woman named Vita Nova in honor of Syjuco and his debut novel, *Ilustrado*. You'll be forgiven for tagging Vita Nova as nothing short of a creep—not least for sending Syjuco a ton of emails, asking him to write her biography, and posting his courteous but evidently worried reply—not because she may very well be just that (a creep), but because she isn't real to begin with. Vita Nova is but one of the characters in the very same book for which she has supposedly put up a loving if LOL-tastic tribute rendered in topsy-turvy HTML. The amusingly amateurish author Web site is, apparently, engineered by none other than Vita Nova's creator, the Montreal-based Filipino writer Miguel Syjuco.

Miguel Syjuco's novel, *Ilustrado*, is also a joke, even as it streams from a rather unfunny prologue involving the death of a renowned Filipino expatriate writer named Crispin Salvador.

One February morning in 2002, Salvador's body is found floating on the Hudson river, prompting speculators in his native Philippines to form their conjectures around either murder or suicide. More importantly, though, the incident impels his erstwhile protégé and hamburger buddy, a Filipino expatriate tyro author named Miguel Syjuco (who joins the company of metafictional characters that includes Jonathan Safran Foer in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* and Paul Auster in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, and who shall hereafter be referred to as Miguel, so as not to be confused with Syjuco the author, although of course you'll end up getting confused anyway), to search for the supposedly missing manuscript of Salvador's *The Bridges Ablaze* (winkingly abbreviated as *TBA*), a potential holder of the title, the Great Filipino Novel.

"The reason for my long exile is so that I can be free to write *TBA*," Salvador, who left Manila on the eve of Ferdinand Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972, told Miguel during one of their numerous intimate

conversations. "Don't you think there are things that need to be finally said? I want to lift the veil that conceals the evil. Expose them on the steps of the temple. Truly, all those responsible. The pork barrel trad-pols. The air-conditioned Forbes Park aristocracy. The aspirational kleptocrats who forget their origins. The bishopricks and their canting church. Even you and me." Such goals are so ambitious as to be remarkably facetious, and already you might be snickering. But that's just the beginning.

To read the rest of *Ilustrado* is to consume a literary salmagundi no doubt palatable to anyone with an appetite for postmodern irony and trickery. Beyond the book's enthralling preliminary pages, which reproduce Miguel's introduction to his biography in progress, *Crispin Salvador: Eight Lives Lived*, (the subtitle alludes to the deceased writer's epithet, "the panther of Philippine letters") is a medley of paragraphs and sections written in varying styles and perspectives. Excerpts from the aforementioned biography; from newspaper articles; from Salvador's interview with the Paris Review; from political blogs and spam comments; from iterations of corny jokes (yes, there are jokes within this joke) injected with Pinoy puns and malapropisms; and from Salvador's multigenre oeuvre, including his tell-all memoir, irreverent essays with titles like "Why Would a Loving God Make Us Fart?" and "Borges Disappointed by the Internet," pulpy crime novels, a trilogy of supernatural stories for young adults, a quartet of love stories set in Europe, and several books of Philippine historical fiction, take turns alongside Miguel's musings and the italic and oneiric accounts of another narrator, who refers to Miguel as "our protagonist," in making the book, if not what little plot the book has, thicker.

Amid such confluence of miscellaneous blocks of words and typesetting schemes, it's easy to forget *Ilustrado* starts with the promise of a plot and that it *has* a plot. Determined to search for *TBA*, Miguel returns to the Philippines—less a balikbayan than a revenant—whereupon he embarks on an investigation of Salvador's life, not indifferent to the realization that it parallels his own more visibly the more things he finds out. Concurrent to this is the emergence of an all-too-familiar image of a country populated by politicians, prostitutes, and political prostitutes. The plot, then, with its fragmented conveyance, is a stand-in for the Filipino's continuing identity crisis and the plight of the Philippine nation. And this roman à clef is a joke, an elaborate prank. Its delivery may falter, but the punchline is certainly a doozie, which leads to another certainty: that of the egg on our face. Yours and mine.

Italo Calvino, one of Syjuco's literary antecedents, along with Roberto Bolaño, David Mitchell, and perhaps Vladimir Sorokin, if only for that one fellatio scene told via a queue of excited moans and grunts, held the belief that literature is "an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living." In the book's prologue, Miguel/Syjuco writes, "this book shoulders the weighty onus of relocating a man's lost life." Self-reflexivity and self-consciousness once again blur the line between fact and imagination. As such, *Ilustrado* is nicely summarized by the antimetabolic relationship between the words *fiction* and *possibilities*: The book is an example of a "fiction of possibilities, entwined with the possibilities of fiction."

Miguel Syjuco has said that he is already hard at work on his next book, which will be a biography of a starlet. The starlet's name? Vita Nova. Her request was granted after all. Fiction and possibilities be damned.

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**Kwesi ??? says**

I don't know why I have to suffer from reading this book, it has a slow beginning, unpredictable ending and added with hifalutin words that can bleed your nose until the last word Syjuco wrote. It was a nice book,

unfortunately, for me it was like another Filipino book that serves to criticize what a Filipino is. No changes made, same with Filipino authors (I don't like to mention), wrote the same thing as this book but thinner and more funnier. I don't know if this book really meant for Filipino readers.

In *Ilustrado*, Syjuco created two characters with the same faith and the other one came back to Philippines to search for the manuscript that was lost in the middle of a tragic night. It was sad and very creative, Syjuco portrays the character with deep meaning with words that stands on each corner of the sentence. The Prologue was so amazing that even a reader won't stop thinking of what really happened that night.

It was unexpected that **Miguel**, as a mentor, went back to the Philippines to witness the past life of **Crispin Salvador**, a Filipino author, executed and awarded with many awards in literature to execute his greatness. Not only to witness but to discover his true self and the manuscript that fooled him in the end.

It was an epic adding love story in the near end of the story, is he in the middle of rushing the story? The love story was so dramatically ended for a few days that he stayed in Manila. Besides having a bad love life scenario he is trying to secrete his poisonous judgments towards what he observed politically, cultural, failures, and the history of the country, even Filipinos abroad.

The book was a mass of collected journals, interviews, article or any written materials **Crispin** wrote. It was a mess! Reading in jumble and very confusing. It was in a satire, but I can't find a way to show the wit between his judgement, is he A Filipino or another Filipino who went back oversea to leave his country because of what he observed from them. Did they even studied why Filipino acts like that? Psychologist might answer that as part of social acts, there are terms that we usually used but we usually interpret it in a wrong way. Have he ever tried to mingle with the farmers in the province? Or went outside his boundaries and asked them why?

It was simply judgement, but very destructing for me, maybe not for the others. In 2008 *Ilustrado* won the second annual Man Asian Literary Prize and Palanca Award for unfinished manuscript. When I heard about it, I was intrigued and can't wait to read it since last year but in the end. Disappointment comes falling hitting my head from time to time. Or maybe I'm still young to accept the truth.

My high school teacher told us that the term 'Filipina' was defined as a prostitute as well as OFW abroad. I forgot the name of the dictionary, but it was one of the worst thing that I heard from my teacher's mouth. Facts are facts.

**Rating** - *Ilustrado* by Miguel Syjuco, **2 Sweets** and the free soul of Crispin. (It was well-written but everything was a mess, it was so confusing the high words and the changing pace made everything worst from the beginning till the end. I want to end this so I did, congrats to me and to my reading buddies. Thanks to my Reading Buddies **Krizia** [x], **K.D.** [x] and **Kristel**.)

### **Challenges:**

*Book #93 for 2011*

*Book #60 for Off the Shelf!*

*Shelfari - Flips Flipping Pages, May 2011 Discussion*

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## **Lit React says**

It's a common complaint that the special effects in movies today are extraneous, explosions and computer graphics inserted into a narrative simply because the director/studio can. Filipino writers in English (IMHO) have the tendency to be the Jerry Bruckheimers or George Lucases (I still love Star Wars though) of literature. They are skilled and they can write and they are hell bent on proving these facts by using every special effect in their writing arsenal.

This penchant for writing FX is on full display in *Ilustrado* - multiple texts, multiple authors/readers, multiple timelines (via multiple texts), multiple obscure dreams; all topped off with drugs, sex and rock and roll. It sounds kind of cool at first, just like all the gee whiz special effects are fun to watch at first. But ultimately getting through it all is kind of tiring.

Ironically, *Ilustrado* itself is aware of the tendencies of Filipino writing, which it describes as "Living on the margins, a bygone era, loss, exile, poor-me angst, postcolonial identity theft. Tagalog words intermittently scattered around for local color, exotically italicized. Run-on sentences and facsimiles of Magical Realism, hiding behind the disclaimer that we Pinoys were doing it years before the South Americans."

There are fulfilling moments in *Ilustrado*, quiet moments when the writing FX ebbs slightly, when the language shines. Particular highlights for me were Crispin's description of the doomed Philippine cavalry marching to war as well as the occasional wry observations of Miguel, "Cliches remind and reassure us that we're not alone, that others have trod this ground long ago."

It's hard to appreciate these quiet moments though as they are constantly drowned out by the literary fireworks and explosions which *Ilustrado* revels in.

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## **Bennard says**

from *The Book Hooligan*

*There are only three truths. That which can be known. That which can never be known. The third, which concerns the writer alone, truly is neither of these. - Crispin Salvador*

The Philippines is a country unlike any other. Our trajectory in history has been decided, for more than 300 years, by foreigners who colonized us. This, in turn, made us search and question our identity and place in history. Should our norms, practices, and culture be Asian, European, or American? In whose footsteps do we follow and what standard should we adapt? The answer, I guess, lies in our mixed heritage. We have in our country a mixture of different identities that converge to create our own. We have a political system that we share with our American colonizers but entrenched in this political system is a feudal relationship between the politicians and the electorate that we got from our Spanish colonizers; our cuisine and culture is deeply Spanish but we are quickly leaning towards an Americanized culture as history moves on; and our respect for tradition and authority is a symbol that, even if we have been Westernized by America and Spain, we are still rooted in Asia.

Thus it is imperative that we, the Filipinos, should learn about our country and our shared history. But learning 300+ years of history is a tiresome endeavor as everybody experienced in our high school years.

Plus a year of studying Philippine History, aside from being boring, is insufficient if you want to learn about the underlying conditions, the implications, and the nuances of Philippine society then and now.

Isn't there a way to make the learning of such subjects concise yet entertaining? Enter *Ilustrado* by Miguel Syjuco. A book that attempts to squeeze 150+ years of Philippine history into 300+ pages. A mean and ambitious endeavor especially for a first novel by a writer.

*Ilustrado* is a novel that tells about the life and death of Crispin Salvador, a self-exiled writer living in America, through the eyes of Miguel Syjuco, his protégé and our narrator (who is also the author of the book). Miguel is searching for the lost manuscript of Salvador, which is supposed to be the latter's magnum opus, and he is compelled to come back to the Philippines to search and to investigate. Along the literary journey, the main narrative is interposed with stories that Salvador has written. These include the story of Dulce, a tomboyish girl living in a seemingly magical Manila; Cristo Salvador, Crispin's grandfather, who is a major figure in the Philippine-American War; Antonio Astig, a crime writer investigating serial killings in Manila; and many other characters that are not part of the main narrative but was included in the attempt to portray every facet of Filipino life.

And Syjuco explored many themes in his ambitious work. He portrayed the Filipino in varying situations. He explored the Filipino in exile; the Filipino diaspora; the reluctant hero that resides within us; the corruption that has trickled down from the past to the present; the unchanged political system; the disparity between rich and poor; the sad situation of the youth today; and many more representations, situations, and trends in Filipino society both past and present which are mostly negative. It is a hard truth to swallow but it is the reality that we face and *Ilustrado* is not at fault for pointing this out.

*Ilustrado* is an ambitious work. Reading it reminds me of my experience reading *Bend Sinister*, one of the early works by Vladimir Nabokov. I think it represents the stage in which the writer writes in order to make an impression on other people. A stage where words are flowery, concepts are too abstract, and understanding the work does not flow naturally. So I describe *Ilustrado* because reading it requires a dictionary and the repetition of certain passages to interpret the text more fully. But it does not hide the fact that *Ilustrado* is a work of brilliance even if there are moments when a reader does not like what he is reading.

And, at the end of the novel, the reader will be more surprised. This may be the only moment when I doubted Syjuco's brilliance. Was the ending a clichéd one, one which is created to just wow the readers and create a plot twist at the end? Or was it a deliberate ending that was thought of at the book's creation and which serves a higher purpose than surprising the reader? In the end, after reading the final chapters again, I find that it may have served a higher purpose than shock value and my faith in Syjuco was restored.

I do not know if *Ilustrado* will become a classic in Filipino literature but I will never contest the fact that it is a worthwhile read and it is worthy of attention. In between the covers, I learned and relearned many things about the history of these 7,107 islands we know as the Philippines and that is not a bad thing.

Rating: 8/10

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## Kristel says

*Ilustrado* is a novel full of and about fakes. The fragments that make up the book are themselves knockoffs of different genres--murder mystery, satire, interviews from *The Paris Review*, everything but the kitchen sink. Miguel Syjuco's brassy debut novel turns on its head the first accusation thrown in the face of every expat writing a novel set in the Philippines: "Just how authentic are *you*?"

Reveling in the flimsy divide between the true and made-up, Syjuco names his protagonist--a listless, wannabe writer in self-imposed exile--after himself. Aldrin of FullyBooked.me points out that other postmodernists like Auster and Safran Foer have created protagonists that they have named after themselves, but this device takes on a more political dimension here. Miguel Syjuco's surname, after all, is a potent one; his own father is a incumbent Iloilo congressman. It practically invites speculation and *chismis*, since the novel's Miguel also comes from a family of politicians. Could (and should) the reader conflate Miguel's ambivalence about the *burgis* class he is a part of with the writer's own views? The book brazenly invites these types of questions and more.

Syjuco crams in a distressing number of conceits here, everything from the complicity of the moneyed elite in the sorry state of Philippines, the inherent vacuousness of "intellectual" conversations during book launches, the increasingly grotesque bread and circuses orchestrated for the consumption of the masses. *Ilustrado* mocks postmodernism even as it wallows in it, going through the techniques like a checklist: bricolage, metafiction, black humor, irony, intertextuality, pastiche. One is tempted to make jokes about having more tricks than a hooker.\*

But while accusations of bloat is a fair one, this novel is most certainly not a gimmick. Some parts were handled clumsily (like Avellaneda's blog commenters and the entire length of Miguel's misguided infatuation with a girl he met in a bookstore) but there are layers within these techniques, becoming clues that lead to a final, mind-bending revelation.

**Read on my blog**

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